TO BELGIUM

LONDON:
W. SPEAIGHT & SONS.
1916.

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TO BELGIUM.

May 3, 1916.

RECENTLY, certain distinguished anti-Catholic foreign writers have not hesitated to proclaim to the world that Spanish Catholics are wholly indifferent, if not hostile, to the cause of Belgium in the European conflict.

Such writers, not content with this assertion, wield it as a weapon of singular opportuneness against the moral and social value of Catholicism. Evoking the eternally odious figure of Pontius Pilate, they represent the Catholics of our country as being intellectually and morally incapable of choosing between good and evil. They go so far as to insinuate that Catholic unity is an empty word and to declare that Christian international law is hopelessly bankrupt.

We cannot allow a calumnious campaign of this nature to receive any countenance from our silence. We feel the necessity of placing things in their true light, and the duty of defining the position which we have adopted from the beginning, and which we desire to maintain, in face of the Great War.

TO BELGIUM.

I.

Let it be understood at the outset that the Spanish nation unanimously associated itself with its Government in the declaration of absolute political neutrality towards both groups of belligerents. That is to say, that the whole of Spain is absolutely resolved not to intervene in the war, nor to assist, in any way whatsoever, either the Anglo-French and Russian Entente or the Austro-German and Turkish Triple Alliance. This attitude is the only one that corresponds to the international situation no less than to the real interests of our country. On the other hand, this attitude has enabled Spain and its king to perform that noble work of mitigating the evils of war, as between both belligerents, which has gained for us so much sympathy and given such prestige to our national flag and to the august sovereign of Spain. Within this limit of strict neutrality, each and every Spaniard is free to give his sympathies to the cause of one or the other of the belligerent groups, according as he believes it to be more or less in conformity with the dictates of justice and the national interests. In this matter our opinions are much divided.

But whatever our differences of opinion and

feeling may be, the case of Belgium must be considered apart. A country, not only neutral, but neutralised by the Great Powers, Belgium, before the war, entered none of the international combinations which have resulted in the European tragedy. It is worthy of remark that even now, in the full fury of war, she has not signed the Pact of London. Dragged unexpectedly and violently into the conflict, she rose up, on the fourth day of August, 1914, to defend her rights and to fulfil her duty of maintaining absolute neutrality; and to-day she continues the struggle in order to recover her independence. Therefore, however we may differ as regards the fundamental causes of the European conflict, there exists among us a perfect unanimity of opinion in so far as the special case of Belgium is concerned.

The case of Belgium may be considered under two heads:—

1. The violation of Belgian neutrality and territory, and the consequent defensive attitude of that nation.

2. The criminal acts alleged to have been committed by the invader when confronted with the resistance of the invaded nation.

We propose to examine these two heads separately, beginning with the second.

II.

In strict justice we cannot make any pronouncement on the "German Atrocities" without admitting the validity of certain preliminary considerations. It is necessary first of all to distinguish the question of *fact* from the question of *right*. But, in the present case, it is easy enough to perceive that the question of fact presents an extraordinary complexity. It does not suffice to prove that the material acts imputed to the invader were committed; it is necessary, before we qualify these acts, to investigate and to determine under what circumstances, for what motives, and to what end, they were committed. Finally, equity demands that we should ascertain whether those crimes, which are beyond dispute, were the acts of undisciplined soldiers or were committed by order and under the responsibility of the Chiefs of the Army: our moral judgment in both cases would be sensibly different.

Referring to the question of *right*, we desire, first of all, to remark that belligerents do not cease to be men because they are at war; nor are they thereby exempt from the precepts of the moral law. It will be to the eternal honour of Christianity that it first proclaimed this

truth and ensured its recognition. Under its beneficent influence the conception of the Rights of Nations has been gradually evolved in the consciences of Christian peoples, the visible results of which have been the limitation of the horrors of war to the belligerent armies, and, even within that limit, the partial moderation of its death-dealing rage. To attack only the hostile army and to smite it no further than is necessary in order effectively to break its resistance—such is the twofold principle on which the modern laws of war are based. It is this principle that we are called upon energetically to vindicate. This we do as heirs of the glorious Spanish school of international law of the sixteenth century and in opposition to the atavistic principles of those who dare to justify the employment of any and every means, including the most savage and frightful, against the enemy army and people if only they conduce to the achievement of victory.

Therefore, is it necessary to say that, if the denunciations and charges levelled by the Belgian authorities against the invaders are well founded, we heartily associate ourselves with those who reprobate, as they deserve, all useless barbarity and all unjustifiable cruelty, even in wartime? The shooting *en masse* of

the peaceful inhabitants of a country; the execution of innocent priests; the massacre of inoffensive old men and of defenceless women and children; the sacrilege and profanation of churches; the systematic destruction of cities and villages; the useless burning of such eminently peaceful institutions as the Catholic University of Louvain—these are deeds that, duly recognised and proved, must evoke the condemnation of every honest conscience. How much more, therefore, must they rouse the indignation of the Catholic conscience which is the prototype of natural rectitude?

But, against these accusations, the voice of the German Emperor himself is raised, supported by his Government, in a telegraphic despatch addressed to the President of the United States. Acknowledging the harshness of the measures employed by the German Army during the invasion and occupation of Belgium, he excuses them by alleging the hostile attitude of the Belgian population and the cruelties practised by its women, children and clergy on wounded German soldiers. A similar allegation is contained in the well-known manifesto of ninety-three German artists and men of science to the civilised world.

In the presence of such a discrepancy in

so far as regards questions of fact, is it to be wondered at that some of our people, citizens of a neutral country, and, moreover, far from the theatre of war, maintain a cautious reserve ?

No one of us, however, fails to render tribute to the demands of justice. Far from remaining indifferent before the gravity of the deeds that have been denounced, or from seeking a pretext in contradictory assertions to evade the judgment which they will deserve before the Tribunal of History, we all adhere to the proposal that an international Commission of Enquiry be constituted, which shall offer guarantees of absolute impartiality as between belligerents and neutrals, in order to elucidate the truth.

III.

So far as the violation of Belgian neutrality is concerned the case presents itself to our conscience under a very different aspect. The fact of the violation of Belgian neutrality stands confessed, and excused, by its very author. For on the fourth of August, 1914, when the German Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg, announced in the Reichstag that the Imperial troops had penetrated into Belgium, he had the honesty to admit that such invasion was

"contrary to the Rights of Nations"; that protests on the part of the invaded country would be justifiable; and to promise that Germany would repair the injustice committed when her military aims had been attained.

But the German Chancellor did not confine himself to this frank confession. He straightway sought to excuse the injustice done, by alleging the necessity of pushing forward in order to ensure the triumph of the German Army, and to frustrate a projected attack by France across Belgian territory. And in fact he proclaimed "that necessity knows no law."

Well and good. Whatever may be the basis of that assertion—and it is not our purpose to pass any judgment upon it—the Chancellor's excuse has been solemnly weighed and found wanting by Him who represents to us the highest moral authority in this world.

Invoking his position as the "supreme interpreter and avenger of eternal law," the sovereign Pontiff, Benedict XV., thought it his duty, in his consistorial allocution of January 22, 1915, to proclaim without ambiguity "that no one is permitted to outrage Justice, whatsoever his motives may be." And, furthermore, he added that he "emphatically reproved every injustice, by whatever side it may have been

committed." And that there might be no manner of doubt as to whether these words had reference to any concrete fact, the Cardinal Secretary of State, in his letter to the Belgian Minister at the Holy See, dated July 6, 1915, confirmed the fact that " the invasion of Belgium was directly intended in the words of the consistorial allocution of January 22 last, wherein the Holy Father emphatically reproves every injustice by whatever side, and from whatever motive, it may have been committed."*

As Catholics we unreservedly subscribe to these words of the Pope, which in this hour of tragic convulsion recall to the whole world the indestructibility of the moral law.

As Spaniards, we possess, if that were possible, an additional motive for subscribing to this vindication of the Rights of Nations. We are a neutral nation, and, in that capacity, we have a special interest in the maintenance of the rights of neutrals in the face of any and every attempt at coercion on the part of the belligerent nations. On the other hand, the glorious

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* " The Chancellor of the German Empire, M. Bethmann-Hollweg, declared on August 4, 1914, in open Parliament, that by invading Belgian territory Germany was violating the neutrality of Belgium in opposition to International Law. Generally, in the case of an

tradition of our school of International Jurisprudence of the sixteenth century, the true parent of modern International Law, compels us in a most particular degree to maintain intact before the world its inflexible criterion of

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actual conflict, one of the parties accuses and the other denies; and the Holy See, being unable to throw any light on the dispute by means of an Enquiry, finds itself unable to make any pronouncement. In the present case, on the contrary, the German Chancellor admitted that the invasion of Belgium was a violation of neutrality and contrary to International Law, although he declared it to be rendered legitimate by military necessity.

"The invasion of Belgium is, consequently, comprehended in the words of the Consistorial Allocution of January 22 last, wherein the Holy Father emphatically reproves every injustice, by whatever side, and for whatever motive, it may have been committed. In the meantime, it is true, Germany has published some documents of the Belgian Staff by which she seeks to prove that Belgium, before the war, had failed in her duty as a neutral Power, and that therefore such neutrality was non-existent at the period of the invasion. But, even if the German point of view be admitted, it would always remain true to say that Germany, according to the Chancellor's own confession, penetrated into Belgian territory with the consciousness that she was committing a breach of neutrality and, as a consequence, an injustice. This is sufficient to prove that this act must be considered as directly included in the terms of the pontifical allocution."—Letter of Cardinal Gasparri, Secretary of State of His Holiness, dated July 6, 1915, and published in the *Osservatore Romano*, July 18, 1915.

justice as applied to every act of aggression, come whence it may.

It is unnecessary to add that if to-day we echo the words of the Pope, in so far as they relate to the invasion of Belgium, we equally reprobate every other violation of neutrality which has taken place during this war, whosoever its perpetuators may have been. But, apart from the fact that this is not the place to collect particulars of all the violations of the rights of neutrals committed during the War, the outrage inflicted on the Belgian people eclipses all the rest and is of special significance. Because the coercion practised on Belgium, on August 4, 1914, in order to force her to favour one of the belligerents at the expense of the other, was not only a summons to renounce a *Right:* it was also a command to betray a *Duty*. It is well known that Belgium, since 1839, has been a neutralised country under an agreement by the Great Powers, and therefore compelled to maintain a strict neutrality towards each and every one of them.

This circumstance gives a very special value to the attitude adopted by Belgium so far as our national conscience is concerned. There may be those among us who would have forgiven Belgium, with more or less willingness, if she

had vindicated her rights, or fulfilled her duty as a neutral nation, with less rigour. There may even be those who go so far as to regret the consequences which, in the ulterior course of events, the resistance of Belgium has brought to one group of belligerents. But, inspired by that most lofty conception of Christian chivalry which breathes through our own national traditions, we unanimously recognise, and admire, the magnificent heroism of this little nation which did not hesitate to confront the vastly superior forces of the aggressor, rather than consent to sacrifice the national honour. We all feel proud to think that if the moral treasure of humanity is enriched to-day with so lofty an example of fidelity to the call of duty, the world will ever have to render thanks for it to a Catholic nation.

Imbued with these sentiments, we, Spanish Catholics, fervently pray that, whatever the military issue of the war may be, Belgium may obtain full reparation for her present wrongs and a complete restoration of her national independence.

LIST OF THE FIRST SIGNATORIES IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER.

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José de Acuña, Barrister, Madrid.

The Count of Agrela, Senator.

The Count of Aguiar, Painter, Seville.

Domingo Aguirrebengoa, Architect, San Sebastian.

José María Aguirre y Serrat-Calvo, Barrister and Notary, Barcelona.

Padre Santiago Alameda, O. S. B., Doctor in Theology, Abbot of the Benedictine Monastery of Silos.

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Ramón Albo y Martí, Doctor of Laws, Barcelona.

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Inocencio Jiménez y Vicente, Professor of Penal Law in the University of Saragossa.

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